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Viewing cable 09SANAA2070, SAUDI STRIKES IN YEMEN: AN INVITATION TO IRAN --

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANAA2070	2009-11-16 14:51	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Sanaa

Appears in these articles:

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 002070

NOFORN
SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR JYAPHE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/16/2019

TAGS: PGOV PTER PREL SA YM

SUBJECT: SAUDI STRIKES IN YEMEN: AN INVITATION TO IRAN --
AND THE U.S.?

REF: SANAA 2053

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Saudi airstrikes on the Yemeni border continue but have not managed to clear the area of Houthi rebels. Yemeni journalists and the Houthis report Saudi strikes are hitting Yemeni targets, claims that are denied by the ROYG and SAG. Multiple media sources report the Saudi Navy is imposing a blockade on ports along northern Yemen's Red Sea coast. As Yemen's neighbors rush to offer the ROYG additional weapons and munitions, Iranian officials denounce the Saudi strikes and are calling for Islamic states to defend innocent Shi'a from ROYG and SAG attacks. Yemeni analysts fear that military action by Saudi Arabia is creating a regional, sectarian war that will lead to direct Iranian involvement. It is also possible that the Houthis have sought to internationalize the conflict, either to attract international support or to ensure that any negotiated political solution would include international, not ROYG, mediators. President Saleh appears to have gained the most from recent developments, as he has finally obtained direct political, financial, and military support for the war from powerful neighbors -- who also happen to be close U.S. allies. END SUMMARY.

Saudi strikes and clashes intensify

¶2. (SBU) Saudi airstrikes on the Yemeni border continue, but have not managed to clear the area of Houthi rebels. On November 14, Houthi fighters reportedly killed two Saudi soldiers and injured five others in the Jebel al-Dukhan area, which reportedly had come under Saudi control days earlier. Though the ROYG and SAG deny it, the Houthis claim Saudi bombardment of Yemeni territory continued November 12-15, including in Malahit, Shada, Hasamah, and Haydan districts. Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam told AFP on November 13 that Saudi bombing reached up to 60 kilometers inside Yemeni territory.xxxxx told PolOff xxxxx that the KSA is "hitting targets in Yemen." Both xxxxx and xxxxx, pointed out that Saudi officials have announced their government's intention of establishing a "buffer zone" by pushing the Houthis dozens of kilometers away from the border. To achieve this goal, they argue, SAG would have to bomb targets inside Yemen. According to Yemeni press, Saudi newspaper al-Riyad reported that Houthi spokesman Abdulsalam was killed in a November 15 Saudi airstrike on the Houthis' media center in Razeh district)- a district that is inside Yemeni territory.

Saudi ships patrolling off yemeni coast

¶3. (S/NF) Meanwhile, multiple media reported that Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on ports along northern Yemen's Red Sea coast to prevent arms smuggling to the Houthis. (Comment: These accounts of a blockade appear exaggerated, as analysts question whether the Saudi Navy could physically enforce one. End Comment.) However, the DATT reports the Yemeni Coast Guard reached an agreement with the Saudi Navy

to blockade Midi Port. The two nations' maritime forces are communicating about their anti-smuggling efforts, but it is not clear to what extent, nor if their efforts are being coordinated. (Comment: The maritime forces' activities are presumably a reaction to the October 25 seizure of an Iranian-crewed ship off the coast of Yemen's Midi Port that was allegedly smuggling arms to the Houthis. The ROYG has yet to produce evidence that Iranians were smuggling arms to the Houthis, as the ship was apparently empty when it was seized. However, echoing a claim Yemen Ambassador al-Hajjri made recently, Foreign Minister Qirbi told PolChief on November 15 the fact that the ship was empty indicated the arms had already been delivered. End Comment.)

Neighbors rush to aid the royg

¶4. (S/NF) Across the region, governments are rushing to aid the ROYG in its battle against the Houthis. The Saudis have agreed to provide the ROYG with APCs, weapons, and ammunition and to assist in the purchase of helicopters for the Yemeni Air Force. The SAG is also offering to purchase weapons and ammunition from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, while the UAE has agreed to broker a similar deal with Bulgaria

Sanaa 00002070 002 of 003

(reftel). Official media reported that the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Yemen met with Minister of Interior Rashad al-Masri on November 15 to discuss security cooperation, presumably related to the war in Sa'ada.

Iranian indignation

¶5. (SBU) On November 15, the Iranian parliament condemned Saudi interference in the conflict and denounced the "killing (of) Yemeni people by Saudi Arabian fighter jets." In its statement, the Majlis urged "all sympathetic officials in the Islamic world ... to utilize all their potential to stop this tragedy and put an end to the killings," according to Tehran Mehr News Agency. The Yemen Post reported on November 15 that the Speaker of Iran's Shura Council, Ali Larijani, accused the US and Saudi Arabia of targeting Shi'ite rebels in Yemen. In a statement posted on the Council's website, he said the USG was an accomplice in the attacks against the Houthis. Meanwhile, ROYG officials repeated their accusations that Iran is funding the Houthis. In a November 15 al-Jazeera interview, General Yahya Saleh, the Qident's nephew anQmmander of the Central Security Forces Counter-Terrorism Unit, said there is "no doubt" Iran is supporting the Houthis)- "the Houthis cannot fund and fight this war with pomegranates and grapes or drugs," he said.

Houthis: "u.s. Plan to silence us"

¶6. (SBU) The Houthis are also accusing the USG of involvement in efforts to subdue them. On November 15, Hizballah's al-Manar TV aired a telephone interview with Houthi spokesman Abdulsalam in which he said the Saudis had been compelled to strike the Houthis after the ROYG failed to implement the "U.S. plan" to silence and subjugate the Houthis. He said the allegations that the Houthis infiltrated Saudi Arabia are nothing more than a pretext to justify a "U.S.-Yemeni security plan" to prolong the war. (Comment: This may refer to false reports in the official Yemeni media that the USG and ROYG signed a military agreement at the November 10-12 joint staff talks. While Post issued a statement clarifying that no such agreement was signed, the initial report, implying that the agreement will aid Yemen's battle against the Houthis, was picked up by Iran's Press TV and even Voice of America. End Comment.)

Implications of regionalization,
fears of saudi over-reaction

¶7. (C) Yemeni analysts believe Saudi involvement is creating a regional sectarian war that will serve as an invitation to Iranian involvement.xxxxx, told the Ambassador on November 15 that Sa'ada residents are increasingly seeing the conflict as a religious one and believe that the Houthis achieve battlefield victories because God is on their side. He added that Saudi Arabia's involvement is only encouraging the Houthis and their supporters to see the conflict in sectarian terms. He claimed the situation in Sa'ada is as bad as it is because the religious factor helps the Houthis garner support from the local population; by sharpening that aspect of the conflict, Saudi involvement could mobilize additional support for the Houthis, he concluded. Moreover, xxxxx believes the Houthis might begin supporting Zaydis on the Saudi side of the border, home to an estimated 2,000 Zaydi Saudis. While they may not share the same grievances as Zaydis in northern Yemen, if the conflict becomes increasingly sectarian, Saudi Zaydis may find a new champion in the Houthis, and the Houthis may find a new base of support among the Saudi population. Furthermore, Qadhi told PolOff on November 15 there is growing sentiment among Iranians that they "should not leave Yemen's Shi'a alone to face aggression from the Saudi and Yemeni governments."

¶8. (C) xxxxx fears that the guerrilla nature of the war, in which small groups of Houthi fighters familiar with the rugged terrain launch sneak attacks at a mighty foe, could provoke the Saudis into over-reacting and causing serious harm to civilians caught in the crossfire. Saudi Arabia is using state-of-the-art weaponry against the Houthis, but in more than a week of heavy bombings apparently have not been able to clear them from the area. xxxxx says if the "little brat in the neighborhood" can continue to

Sanaa 00002070 003 of 003

capture and kill Saudi soldiers, the KSA may not react rationally and may begin targeting villages, markets, and other civilian gathering places in order to root out the insurgents.

Houthi gambit?

¶9. (C) What prompted the SAG's involvement in the war is a subject of considerable speculation in Yemen. While President Saleh has long been encouraging Saudi Arabia to join the fight, most analysts believe the Houthis had reason to provoke their involvement as well. xxxxx thinks the Houthis attacked the Saudi border guards in order to internationalize the conflict. "Maybe they drew in Saudi Arabia because they wanted to negotiate with the master rather than the servant," he told PolOff on November 15. Havez al-Bukari, President of Yemen Polling Center, agrees that the Houthis wanted to draw Saudi Arabia into the conflict in order to get more attention from the international community. According to Bukari, by internationalizing the conflict, the Houthis' demands for international mediation - which the ROYG has refused, insisting that any negotiations will be handled domestically - become much stronger. He believes the Houthis want a foreign government or international body to broker dialogue between the ROYG and the Houthis, since previous peace talks were predominantly internal affairs. They want a "partner" in the talks, not a "sponsor" of them, as he characterized Qatar's role in mediating the 2008 Doha peace accord.

Comment

¶10. (S/NF) The ROYG and the Houthis both stand to gain from expanding the conflict beyond Yemen's borders: the ROYG benefits from the military and financial might of its powerful northern neighbor, while the Houthis are better positioned to receive overt Iranian backing or to spur some sort of international political settlement. Yet the benefit

to Saudi Arabia seems less clear. While the need to protect its border is obvious, the airstrikes could backfire in a number of ways. First, the SAG risks becoming embroiled in an intractable guerrilla war. Second, Saudi involvement fuels the ROYG's perception that the real, immediate threat to the Arabian Peninsula is the Houthis, not al-Qaeda. Third, as noted reftel, by transferring millions of dollars worth of weapons to the ROYG, there is a strong chance the very same weapons will leak into the gray market and end up being used against Saudi Arabia by terrorists. Fourth, it invites Iranian involvement)- which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, since the fear that Iran was at Saudi's doorstep is partly what motivated the strikes in the first place.

¶11. (S/NF) COMMENT CONTINUED. In the short-term at least, it seems like President Saleh has gained the most from the Saudis' entry into the conflict. His glee when the Saudis launched their airstrikes indicates he finally received what he has been pushing for)- political, financial, and direct military support for the war from Yemen's powerful neighbor and principal benefactor. He will use this support to battle the Houthis as well as to send a signal of the regime's staying power to other domestic actors who may seek to undermine it. Saleh will not rest with Saudi support, however, and will doubtlessly rely on the SAG to advocate some measure of USG involvement, given our strong ties to Riyadh. END COMMENT.

Seche